

FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

Strength for the Storms of Life

March 1, 2009
Pastor Mark Nieting

Genesis 22: 1-18

I may be showing my age a bit, but one of the most interesting Bible stories, the story that is our text today, was the subject of one of Bob Dylan's first "hit songs" back about 40 years or so (when Dylan, one could argue, actually had a voice). The dialog goes like this:

*Oh God said to Abraham, "Kill me a son."
Abe said, "Man, You must be putting me on."
God said, "No." Abe said, "What?"
God said, "You can do what you want, but the next time you see me
coming, you better run."
Abe said, "Where do you want this killin' done?"
God said, "Out on highway 61." (Dylan, Highway 61 Revisited)*

Did Abraham (or Abe, as Dylan called him) really cave in that fast when God confronted him with this tremendously difficult test? And why, we want to know, did Abraham NEED testing anyway, and by asking him to SACRIFICE HIS SON...his only son...the son he loved!!!...isn't that over the top?

What I find absolutely fascinating is Abraham's reaction....at least the one we have written in the pages of Scripture. There's not a hint of anxiety or stress on the part of Abraham, although we have to wonder how much sleep Abraham got before the next morning, when Abraham packed up and headed out, following God's directions. Over several days of travel, there is no doubt in my mind that Abraham was doing some serious thinking. After all....God had made Abraham some rather incredible promises: a bountiful land, numerous descendants (which had yet to show up....so far the count was one son on his way to be sacrificed), and a role in human affairs that would bless generations to come.

So far, Abraham had believed God.....and now God was putting his belief to the test..... a kind of "do you love me, let me count the ways," put the rubber to the road, proof is in the pudding test.

And while I'm not trying to write extra material for the pages of inspired Scripture, Abraham comes face to face with one of the great tensions of life: who do I love the MOST... my SON.... or my GOD???

In modern terms, in our daily lives....since God isn't often going to ask us to sacrifice our children, this scenario plays out like this: In the office, IF you're the boss, do you prefer your meetings to be pleasant and enjoyable? Do you get uncomfortable at meetings if your coworkers argue? Does conflict give you headaches...and so you avoid it? Do you say "yes" to your children so they will "like you" instead of the long and hard road of cultivating their respect by holding the line? Are you a "peace at all costs" person, to the detriment of your Christian faith..... or.....are you willing to take a stand for Christ, no matter what?

I'm sure Abraham was thinking some of the very same things. Why can't my contact with God be pleasant and enjoyable? How can I handle the horror I feel as I think about what is going to happen to my son? Is there any way that I can find a peaceful way out of this? How can I reconcile with my son before I ... before I ... have to kill him? Come on, God, give me a break! Why should I have to choose between my son and You? Why ME? Why not pick on someone with a dozen sons....it can't be that bad for him! What kind of God ARE you, anyway, that you ask me to OBEY you?!?!?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran martyred by the Nazis, put it this way: *"Only he who believes is obedient....and only he who is obedient believes!"*

Abraham believes and Abraham obeys. He takes the wood for the burnt offering and lays it on his son Isaac, and he himself carries the fire and the knife. The two walk on together, and then Isaac innocently asks, "Father! ... where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" We can imagine the ache in his chest and the lump in his throat as he answers, "God himself will provide the lamb."

Now the anguish begins to seep out of the pages of Genesis. The choice he's made is a conflicted choice that looks like it will lead to certain sorrow and despair in his life. He desperately wants harmony. He wants a peaceful resolution to this mess..... but does not know how in the world he can achieve it while remaining faithful to God. So he

makes the tough choice of sacrificing his son in order to be at peace with God, no matter how stormy life might be in the short run.

Abraham binds his son Isaac, lays him on the altar, on top of the wood, and clutching the knife in his hand, reaches out to kill his son. Right about now, Isaac must have grasped the full extent of his father's faith.....but at just the right moment....which is how God's timing always IS.... an angel appears with a last-minute stay of execution, and announces that Abraham has passed the LORD'S test of faithfulness. Abraham looks up to see a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns, and he sacrifices the beast in place of his son, discovering in a new and dramatic way that the LORD will, in fact, provide.

Did we actually THINK that God would allow Isaac to die? Would God ask Abraham to do something that God wasn't willing to do himself? Will we ever face a temptation that Jesus Himself did not face?

I've read a lot of books on leadership, both military and otherwise. There are many things good leaders have in common: sharp minds, an uncanny knowledge of details, the willingness to work extremely hard, the ability to calculate and take risks...the list goes on. But one thing struck me above all: **Good leaders won't ask their followers to anything they themselves wouldn't be willing to do.**

God HIMSELF sent HIS SON into the world to be sacrificed. Isaac may have been a GOOD son, but he wasn't a perfect son. Jesus WAS perfect....and Jesus was God's ONLY. Despite the closeness of a relationship we can't even begin to understand, the relationship within the Holy Trinity...God was willing to sacrifice Jesus on the cross NOT as a demonstration of trust, but as a payment for the sins of all the other sons and daughters of God. There was no 'ram in the thicket' when Jesus was on the cross.....He was the Ram, the Lamb of God, sacrificed to take away the sins of the world.

God pulled the plug on the sacrifice of Isaac....but for Jesus....it ran the course.

And so God Himself became the center of the Perfect Storm on "Good Friday," the day that ended in the death of Jesus on the altar of sacrifice for our sins.

The storms..... both in the temptations of the Evil One and the ways in which God TESTS His people come in all kinds, all shapes and in varying degrees of intensity and duration. And while they may FEEL the same, remember the difference: God TESTS our faith... our obedience..... and our love. DO we love Him more than anything else? It's a 1st commandment issue: right off the top.

On the other hand, the devil TEMPS us to sin..... and he usually starts small... with lies and jealousy and ... well... you fill in the blanks.

In the next few weeks we're going to deal with some of these issues in our lives and begin to understand how God can work in them to bring us closer to him.

But just for starters, Are you dealing with

- an abusive relationship?
- a child who need significant amounts of "tough love?"
- a sinful lifestyle?
 - an illness that's draining the life out of you?
 - financial pressures that are challenging your stewardship, or even the lifestyle to which you are accustomed?
 - grief, loss, betrayal, stresses and strains and so much more.

God will be with you no matter what....that is His PROMISE. He also promises that you will not receive more than you can handle..... and HE will supply you with a ram in a thicket to turn our struggles and our sorrows, our temptations and our tests into GOOD for us. If God is calling you to service, to obedience, or to greater faithfulness, God will challenge you - as he challenged Abraham - to trust him with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. You will discover that divinely sanctioned conflict.....and even a confrontation with trial, temptation and testing, does not lead to death and destruction, but rather to life and growth and new opportunity.

God's blessing WILL with you as you deal, one after another, with the storms of life! Amen.